

# **Slovakia's key goals and interests as regards**

## **THE WESTERN BALKANS**

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### **1.Introduction**

Along with Slovakia's integration into the most important Euro-Atlantic institutions, the co-operation and development of relations with countries in the wider European area is also an important part of Slovakia's foreign policy. The Western Balkans hold a special position in this area.

The interest of Slovakia's foreign policy in the countries of the Western Balkans has been evident since the establishment of the independent Slovakia. Slovakia is interested in developing relations with the countries in this region and attempts to build upon the traditional ties that existed between our countries until 1991. As regards the development of relations, everything positive that was accomplished in the above period, in the field of politics, economy and other areas of common interest, is an important capital.

Slovakia's approaches towards Western Balkan countries have been outlined in its programming and conceptual documents, encompassing the Government's Policy Statement, Medium-term Foreign Policy Priorities for the 2000-2003 period, as well as the annually updated Orientation of Slovakia's Foreign Policy. They express our interest in reinforcing democracy and strengthening economic and social stability in this part of the continent, which has a direct impact on political, economic and social stability in our country.

Being a country aspiring to EU membership, Slovakia co-ordinates its foreign policy vis-a-vis the Western Balkans with the EU's approaches. Slovakia fully agrees with the content of the EU's strategy for the Balkans, which was presented by EC External Relations Commissioner Chris Patten in his speech to the International Crisis Group's session held in Brussels on 10 July 2001, as well as with other decisions adopted in the framework of distinct presidencies. The Balkan region was one of the key priorities of the Greek Presidency at the EU Council in the first half-year of 2003.

At the extraordinary EU-Balkan Summit of 21st June 2003 in Porto Karras, was defined the so-called European Partnership as one of the EU instruments, that should assure more intensive dialog and assistance to the Western Balkan countries by building a certain „superstructure“ to the Stabilisation and Association Process. The Summit has also clearly defined the European perspective of the Western Balkans,

including the full membership in the EU of the countries of the region after having fulfilled appropriate accession criteria (esp. Copenhagen criteria).

## **2. Current situation**

The area of Western Balkans underwent complicated and problematic development over its history. The source of all conflicts in Balkan nations' modern history is the unresolved minority issue. Balkan states are typified by their multiethnic character and ethnic, cultural and religious specificities. The series of armed conflicts that occurred in the last decade of the 20th century led to the break-up of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) and establishment of sovereign states.

Despite its significant instability, the Western Balkan region has been an integral part of Europe and has been of key strategic importance to it. The Western Balkans are Europe's border region; the preservation of stability and security here is therefore one of the primary tasks and priorities of the EU, OSCE, NATO, and the UN.

All of the Western Balkan countries have now expressed support for values typical for developed democracies. The integration into Euro-Atlantic political, economic and security structures has become a priority for these countries. Because of common interests and the regional importance of Western Balkan countries, the European Union has initiated the Stabilisation and Association Process aimed at achieving stability by means of closer co-operation.

From the EU's standpoint, the Stabilisation and Association Process, within which the EU gradually concludes bilateral Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAA) with individual countries of the Western Balkans, is regarded as one of the Union's most efficient instruments in this region. The SAAs are designed to govern the co-operation between the EU and these countries, while taking the specific conditions in each of them into account. The EU makes the conclusion of SAAs conditional upon progress in the enforcement of reforms in the political, economic and legislative areas. Individual projects focus on support for reforms and development programmes bringing Western Balkan countries closer to integration into European structures. The EU does its best to support their endeavour and contribute to the consolidation of economic and political conditions in this part of Europe. In this way the EU gradually begins to play the leading role in its stabilisation, security, development and its progressive integration with the prosperous part of the "old continent".

A number of initiatives, structures and mechanisms have been created to support regional co-operation in the political and economic areas – the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe (SP SEE), South-Eastern Europe Co-operation Initiative (SECI), Black Sea Economic Co-operation (BSEC), Memorandum of Understanding on Trade Liberalisation and Facilitation in SEE, Danube Commission, Charter on Good-Neighbourly Relations, Stability, Security and Co-operation in SEE.

Slovakia has significantly contributed to the democratisation of the Western Balkan region, in particular in the territory of the former FRY, through its governmental and non-governmental sectors. The so-called Bratislava process, which created a uniform

framework for the operation of Slovak diplomats and representatives of the Slovak non-governmental sector, played an important role in this context. By providing material assistance, co-ordinating activities, building communication channels and exchanging experience with Serbian opposition and non-governmental sector representatives, Slovakia significantly contributed to the fall of Milosevic's regime and the building of democratic and civil society in the FRY. The activity of Slovak Minister of Foreign Affairs E. Kukan at the post of Special Envoy of the UN SG for the Balkans within years 1999-2001, in which he significantly affected the developments in the Balkans in the strengthening of stability, security and building of democracy, was an appreciation and recognition of the work of Slovak international relations and diplomacy experts.

### **3. Relations between Slovakia and Western Balkan countries**

Slovakia has traditional social, economic and cultural ties with Western Balkan countries. Our countries also share similar historical experience, the non-conflict nature of mutual relations, and non-existence of open issues, together with the ongoing transformation processes in the social and economic areas and common foreign policy priorities.

For Western Balkan countries, Slovakia is a model country with major achievements in the transformation processes, integration into Euro-Atlantic structures, the peaceful transition to sovereignty, and the existence of multiethnic society and understanding between its individual segments.

The relations between Slovakia and the **Serbia and Montenegro (S&MN)** can be described as problem-free, historically unburdened, and dynamically developing, and have a great potential for further development. Following the democratic changes in October 2000, Slovakia built upon the solid foundations for bilateral co-operation laid in the post-Dayton period of 1996-1998. There is a standard contractual framework between Slovakia and the S&MN. Both parties perceive the Slovak community of 60 thousand people, who have lived in Vojvodina for more than 250 years, as a stabilising factor for our bilateral relations.

**Macedonia** attempts to develop political and economic relations with Slovakia within the limits of its possibilities. It sees us as a country, which, being a country associated to the EU, directly negotiating accession to the EU and a serious candidate for NATO membership, can be helpful in its integration ambitions. From the standpoint of the Macedonian party, the restrictions given by the visa requirement, which it considers to be an obstacle to the development of mutual economic relations, can be regarded as a distracting element in our current relations.

Our mutual relations with **Croatia** also have a good informal basis and have developed naturally throughout the history regardless of political arrangements. The current situation is favourable for the further development of relations between our republics. The development of our mutual economic and trade relations has yet to reach the desired standard, despite both countries' priority orientation on the EU.

The relations between Slovakia and **Bosnia and Herzegovina** are still at the initial stage. Our mutual trade exchange is exceptionally modest. Slovakia has initiated progress in the preparation of basic contractual documents. The recent liberalisation of laws and internal regulations, which provides advantages to Central and Eastern European countries, is favourable for the possibilities of developing our bilateral relations.

The relations with the **Republic of Albania** are not sufficiently developed. The fact that there is currently no direct diplomatic representation between the two countries is one of the reasons for the insufficient standard of co-operation in the political and, in particular, the economic area.

#### **4. Slovakia's key goals and interests as regards the Western Balkans**

From the standpoint of security and stability, the Western Balkan region is extraordinarily important for Slovakia due to its geographical location and significant human potential. Our country's interest is to ensure that the development of our relations with Western Balkan countries contributes to and assists in the preservation of peace and building of stability and prosperity in this part of the European continent, and that it poses no threat to the stability of other countries.

The following corresponds with Slovakia's interests in the Western Balkan area:

##### **(1) in the political area:**

- integration of the countries into Euro-Atlantic political, security and economic structures;
- existence of an open, civic and democratic society and the rule of law, based on the principles of market economy;
- creation of a stable multiethnic society and co-operation between the countries to fulfil their international legal commitments in the field of democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms;
- preservation of the status quo in issues of state borders and territorial integrity and support for these issues in bilateral contacts and at international fora.

##### **(2) in the economic area:**

- existence of a prospering and transparent market economy in the region's countries;
- economic stability of Western Balkan countries;
- higher standard of mutual economic and trade relations and participation of Slovak economic organisations in the reconstruction of the region.

(3) in the **security area**:

- comprehensive co-operation in the fight against organised crime and illegal migration;
- resolution of crisis situations;
- creation of the regional dimension of European security.

(4) in **other areas**:

- comprehensive development of the Slovak national minority in Western Balkan countries;
- revitalisation and effective protection of the environment, in compliance with the sustainable development strategy;
- removal of the consequences of war conflicts, with special emphasis on the navigability of the Danube River.

## **5. Conclusion**

The specification of our interests in the Western Balkans and identification of the paths leading to their asserting is one of our active contributions to the building of a unified, secure and prospering Europe, unthinkable without the participation of every country. The resolution of the current crisis in the Western Balkan region and the establishment of democratic conditions, political, social and economic stability is an important part of the processes affecting the integration of Europe. It is therefore necessary to intensify our activities in this region and utilise the political capital invested in this area in recent years. This will ultimately not only help our integration efforts, but also improve Slovakia's overall political, economic and social status.